WIDENING THE CIRCLE:
Enlisting The Collaboration Of New Partners In African Educational Development

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Abstract

To develop new patterns of collaboration between the educational system in Africa and its numerous partners, we would do well to seek first a better understanding of the collaboration -- recognized and unrecognized -- already taking place within the sector itself. This paper briefly examines a series of innovative and encouraging types of "partnering" that have been experimented in the domain of nonformal education over the last few years, including new forms of collaboration with communities, with development agencies, and between nonformal and formal delivery systems. It is based on studies carried out over the last two years by the ADEA Working Group on Nonformal Education.

Introduction

One critical starting point for the effort to develop and improve patterns of collaboration among the educational system in Africa and its many present and potential partners is to get a better understanding of the collaboration -- recognized and unrecognized -- already taking place within the sector itself.

Nonformal and adult education plays an important part in overall system performance in Africa and has essentially done so by drawing on and collaborating with a variety of partners who are not always as well represented in the rest of the system. In this paper, we want briefly to examine five important types of collaboration that presently characterize African nonformal education programs and may have useful implications for better partnering throughout the educational system:

(1) Public-private sector collaboration in educational improvement

(2) New partnerships between development agencies and educational providers

(3) Collaboration with and among communities themselves

(4) Collaborative research with African scholars and practitioners

(5) New complementarities between formal and nonformal delivery systems

Our remarks are essentially based on three series of studies recently completed under direct sponsorship of the ADEA Working Group on Nonformal Education (WG/NFE) or in collaboration with partner agencies: the PADLOS[1]-Education inquiry into decentralization and local capacity-building in West Africa (cf. Easton 1997b); the ABEL[2]-funded studies of new forms of knowledge acquisition in East and West Africa (cf. Easton and Closson 1997); and the ADEA-funded studies of relations between formal and nonformal education in Southern and

[1] "PADLOS" is the acronym for the "Projet d'appui au développement local dans le Sahel" (Support Project for Sahelian Local Development), a program initiated by the Comité Inter-états de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel (Inter-State Committee for Drought Abatement in the Sahel), based in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The study was jointly supported by the CILSS, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the WG/NFE..

[2] ABEL stands for "Achieving Basic Education and Literacy", a long-term research project funded by USAID and coordinated by the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, DC. The NFE/WG took an active role in piloting a series of six studies under this aegis in 1996-1997.

Eastern Africa (cf. Closson, Capacci and Mavima 1997). For each we outline the central issues, summarize key recent findings, and present a few practical implications.

1. Public-private sector collaboration in educational delivery

The issues

In an era of shrinking public budgets, "rationalized" -- if not rationed -- foreign aid, and increasing government decentralization, it has become critically important to mobilize and coordinate *all* potential sources of support for education. The role of the state in many African countries is dramatically shifting and other actors have come on stage or have enlarged their involvement in social service provision. The entry into the educational field of growing numbers and types of *private organizations* -- both nonprofit and for-profit -- is a major case in point. It is also a phenomenon that has been developing in the area of nonformal education for a number of years, and lessons from that experience may now be of use to the entire educational system.

Though nonformal education has always been an arena of private endeavor and highly varied supply, the collapse of funding for public programs of this nature in the early 1980s, coupled with rapid growth in the number and activity level of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and in local community initiatives to make up for the shortfall in government services, began fundamentally transforming the "topography" of literacy and training over a decade ago.

The findings

Several studies conducted under WG/NFE aegis in eastern and southern Africa focus on emerging patterns of relationship between private and public providers of nonformal education and reveal both great potential and major pitfalls.

- Private for-profit enterprises (PFPs) of training and nonformal education -- many established by Africans in recent years -- are a growing though distinctly minority presence, most evident in sectors of middle-income African countries (like the rural water management domain in Ghana) where there are both relatively abundant resources and strong training needs.
- Private nonprofit agencies (PNPs, generally termed nongovernmental organizations or "NGOs") have proliferated over the last decade, particularly in lower income countries, where opportunities for entrepreneurial endeavor appear still quite restricted. They account for an increasing proportion of educational service delivery and enjoy a flexibility and sometimes an efficiency that can enhance performance. At the same time, they are frequently in competition with each other for funds and are sometimes perceived by local actors and

associations as parasitic. NGOs may also adopt conflictual policies that undermine other sustainable development efforts: in one case studied in East Africa but encountered elsewhere, an NGO practice of paying local teachers well above market rate -- and above what community associations could possibly -- afford sapped energies for an innovative and locally-owned alternative schooling program .

- Together these private actors are now responsible for a major proportion of the great variety of nonformal educational services delivered locally in African countries. Though inter-group coordination and efforts at facilitative State supervision are more common in education -- and in literacy and nonformal education in particular -- than in any other sector of development, they still leave a great deal to be desired. Governments have manifestly not yet mastered the facilitative, regulatory and coordinating role that they are called upon to play, despite laudable pronouncements in favor of "faire faire" (help them do it) policies, as in Senegal. The bureaucratic model of public behavior still prevails and clearly does not fit the new situation.
- Local beneficiaries continue to be the most underrepresented stakeholder group in nascent efforts at NGO and PFP coordination: participatory evaluation and planning are not yet the rule. Yet local actors are, in the long run, those most concerned, for they must sustain whatever is to be sustainable. As a Moré proverb (Burkina Faso) reminds us, "The one who sleeps on a borrowed mat must realize he is lying on the cold, cold ground."

The practical implications

Effective yet minimally-intrusive coordination, plus a judicious balance between regulation and stimulation, are obviously sorely needed -- characteristics of a new kind of public-private sector relationship that uses the authority of the former to nurture and orient the dynamism of the latter. Playing such a facilitative role requires much greater competence of public sector personnel than does a traditional bureaucratic model of behavior and so poses the question of the training and incentives of public sector staff. Even in the best of cases, however, it seems highly unlikely that appropriate models of public-private sector collaboration can be developed and monitored strictly from a national level or without the active intervention of beneficiary representatives and local groups, a fact which argues strongly for greater decentralization of decision-making and more subregional responsibility for system coordination.

2. New partnerships between development agencies and educational providers

The issues

The development of civil society throughout Africa and the movements of economic and social decentralization that currently traverse the continent are creating a pronounced demand for training, as well as rich new opportunities for learning, among the members and leaders of the nascent local enterprises, community associations and non-governmental organizations involved.

For local men and women to assume new responsibilities in activities as diverse as health service delivery, crop marketing, credit mutual administration and natural resource management, they must also acquire new skills and knowledge.

That reality has stimulated an unprecedented level of three-way collaboration among (a) local communities and associations, (b) agencies and NGOs concerned with development, and (c) providers of literacy, education and training for adults and for those beyond school-entry age. In such circumstances, "education for human development" is no longer just a slogan and credo: it is becoming a local game plan in which developers and educators share critical and complementary roles. Increasingly, development services are realizing that economic investment and resource management activities at the local level are simply not sustainable unless local people understand, appropriate and staff them. At the same time, communities and new civil society associations are realizing that education does not serve their purposes unless it prepares them and their children to control the stakes and levers of their own local development as well as to qualify for further learning. And both are wanting to partner with educators in accomplishing these goals.

The findings

This new level of collaboration with development agencies and communities, and the factors driving it, were the subject of a two-year study in which the WG/NFE took part on "Decentralization and Local Capacity Building in West Africa." Findings indicate – as the pronouncements highlighted in Box 2 illustrate – that civil organizations are pressing for greater autonomy in management of their own development activities. Without increasingly functional levels of literate competence – whether in African or international languages, in Western or Arabic script – local people have great difficulty getting beyond the rudimentary levels in assumption of new responsibility or instituting systems of democratic accountability.

Developments in southern Mali over the elapsed decade, closely examined in the PADLOS-Education Study, illustrate the potential that intersectoral collaboration and community empowerment may unleash under such circumstances. The upward spiral began with the transfer of responsibility for local management of crop markets and agricultural credit facilities to villages having sufficient numbers of literate adults to absorb the necessary training. Revenues that the new village associations accumulated in the process served then to fuel local investments in areas such as natural resource management, animal husbandry, health service delivery, and community governance -- each decided by villages representatives and requiring (or preceded by) further

training of association members. The detonator for this cycle of locally-directed "capitalization" was thus *direct collaboration among education providers, rural development agencies, and the communities themselves*. And in southern Mali, as elsewhere each time viable development activities and pertinent training are blended and interleaved, the consequence has been that numerous local communities have begun financing and replicating the educational undertaking on their own from the proceeds of the new economic and social activities that it has allowed them to direct.

The practical implications

Thanks to the impetus of decentralization, we are witnessing on the part of development agencies and civil society organizations alike, radically increased interest in education as a means for achieving locally-managed and locally-sustainable development, as well as a vehicle of cultural enrichment and access to urban labor markets. This is an extremely hopeful sign, but the focus of such interest is on "education" in its broadest connotations -- that is, the entire set of training and learning activities that provide the competencies and confidence required for self-directed development -- and on improved "interleaving" of education and development. Nonformal educators are increasingly required to master this key articulation between the economic and the instructional domains, an area where private providers like NGOs that embrace multiple branches of local development may therefore have a comparative advantage.

Box 1
Rural producers insist on training

The following is an excerpt from the closing declaration of the Congress of Rural Organizations held in Dédougou, Burkina Faso in October 1994:

"From October 3rd to 6th, 1994, over 200 peasant members of 100 peasant organizations from all 30 provinces of Burkina Faso held their first national meeting for and by peasants themselves... The peasant organizations were able to broach matters that are of weightiest concern to them:

...Fifth, the peasants are determined to seek with and from their partners, the kind of support that will enable them to assume their responsibilities. It is first and foremost a question of responding to their need for training, particularly training in financial and organizational management, training in technical topics appropriate to the new conditions of agricultural production. The peasant organizations seek partners who recognize and respect their experience and their needs..."

(Devèze 1996, pp.173-174)

3. Collaboration with and among communities: Brokering new social contracts

The issues

In a period of African history when social tensions may be exacerbated by the transitions and dislocations of uncertain growth, education has an increasingly important role to play in promoting renewed collaboration with (and within) communities, as well as better partnering *across* their natural dimensions of diversity (age, gender, ethnicity, religion.). WG/NFE studies over the last two years have focused on areas where this bridge-building has been underway.

The findings

In recent years, local schools across Africa have happily sought increased levels of parent and community participation in their governance and a closer relationship between classroom and social environment. But the role of education in defusing conflict and brokering new social contracts can and should go beyond this initial form of collaboration. A number of experiences in nonformal education, highlighted in studies conducted over the last two years, illustrate the potential:

- *Complementary roles for young and old in community enterprise*: In the village of Nwodua (central northern Ghana), nonformal training in literacy and water management undertaken by returned emigrants resulted in creation of a local primary school and in development of a whole new structure of community governance, where elders advise a Town Development Council composed of newly-literate middle-age adults, whereas younger members assume technical tasks. Gerontocracy, a benevolent system for other circumstances, seems to have been progressively replaced by a new complementarity among age groups effected by local people themselves.

- *New opportunities for women in income-generating activities -- and in society*: A study of skill acquisition by women in income-generating groups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal demonstrated that the growth of such women's voluntary associations has increased the prominence of women in "mixed" groups as well and initiated some gradual redefinition of female roles and responsibilities in the communities concerned. In a few villages of the Thiès region of Senegal, newly-literate leaders of local women's associations took it upon themselves, after joint study of maternal and child health issues, to convince village authorities to ban female circumcision and, once they succeeded, organized their own delegations to neighboring communities in order to enlist broader commitment.

- *Acquisition and application of conflict-resolution skills*: Nonformal training groups for women in rural Senegal affiliated with Tostan[3] studied conflict-resolution skills and began establishing unofficial tribunals for mediation that, according to police records, have markedly diminished the number and gravity of cases that come into the justice system in their regions.

- *Fostering new networks among local communities and groups:* In numerous communities studied throughout West Africa, nonformal training activities have provided a vehicle and venue for new forms of inter-community alliance, often traversing ethnic and religious barriers. In Burkina Faso, an organization ("Song Taaba") founded as an outcome of literacy acquisition by women in an urban neighborhood of Ouagadougou to create food-transformation businesses has been reaching out to groups of women throughout the central region of the county to create women's marketing networks. In Senegal, a village association in Fandène supported by ENDA/GRAF[4] has developed a network of 20 credit mutuals across as many surrounding communities of differing ethnic composition, and has even organized technical assistance teams to help simiarly-inclined groups in poor urban neighborhoods.

- *Bridging local and international knowledge*: Nonformal education programs have habitually given prominence to literacy in African languages, both as a functional and cultural asset and as a stepping stone to international-language learning. In the processm they have amassed a considerable reserve of African-language literature on local history and knowledge likely to enrich future primary and secondary schooling. Two of the studies carried out under WG/NFE aegis over the past two years investigated this dynamic: one on bridges between traditional herbal medicine and modern medical training in Kenya, the other on learning from elders' knowledge in natural resource management projects in Mali.

The practical consequences

To the degree that education becomes a truly local function, rather than an import largely directed from central levels, it provides a critical platform for brokering and working out the new

[3] "Tostan," a Wolof word for "breaking out of the egg", is also the name of an NGO located in Thiès, Sénégal and devoted to promoting nonformal education and training for women in rural and poor urban localities throughout the country.

[4] ENDA, initials of an organization named Environnement et Développement, is located in Dakar, Senegal. GRAF stands for "Groupe de recherche, action et formation": Research, Action and Training Group, an ENDA affiliate.

social contracts that sustainable development requires -- in short, for facilitating new partnerships at the ground level. “Localizing” education in this manner without comprising genuine quality means well-supported and well-conceived decentralization, ample training... and increased collaboration between formal and nonformal education, a topic to which we shall return in conclusion.

4. Broader collaboration in educational research and planning

The issues

“Where there is no vision, the people perish,” it is said. Yet how are we to make the vision-generating activities of educational research and planning a more relevant and integral part of the conduct of African education, a more collaborative endeavor? Some of the experience gained by the WG/NFE in conducting such activities and forging new research partnerships may add insight to this arena, which is of concern to all branches of the educational system.

The findings

Three major observations stand out from our experience with broadening collaboration in educational (and related) research and planning.

The first concerns *the importance of involving local actors in applied research endeavors through participatory methodologies*, and of enlisting national researchers in the necessary technical support and guidance. In a number of cases, WG/NFE-affiliated studies over the last two years have modeled precisely this approach: National researchers were engaged, under performance contract, to identify, contract, train and coordinate local research teams (generally named in turn by their communities or local associations) in areas where particularly innovative nonformal education experiences were underway. The researchers then assist these local participants in the definition of inquiry topics within the general area of interest, the development of research plans and the execution and interpretation of studies. Though there are inevitably a multitude of difficulties to be resolved in the decentralized research process, such approaches have two enormous advantages:

- making local actors direct stakeholders of educational research; and
- providing them -- and the national researchers involved -- with an intense and hands-on training experience in the generation and use of locally-relevant research.

The second related lesson of experience concerns *the kind of institutional configuration that can sustain such local involvement and national researcher direction*. The best example in this regard comes from WG/NFE studies recently completed in five countries of southern Africa. The

system established was, in effect, four-tiered. Within each of the countries, *national* researchers from selected institutions developed topics and helped organize and train *local* participants. They were in turn assisted and coordinated by an African "technical support institution" with a *regional* vocation: in this case, a research institute of Specis College in Zimbabwe with an assist from the SACHED Trust in South Africa. Further logistic and research support for the development and exercise of this new regional vocation was provided on an *international* basis by a northern research institute: in this particular case, the Center for Policy Studies in Education of the Florida State University (USA), contracted to this end by the Steering Committee of the WG/NFE. A combination of international and cross-national African collaboration thus provided the momentum for accomplishment and dissemination of a series of critical studies involving both national and local contributors.

The third arena of experience is that of *participatory educational and social planning*. In their frequent role of training organizers for development operations, nonformal educators have been involved over the years -- though less regularly than might have been optimal -- in piloting "participatory evaluations" of those operations, often relying on their own local trainees as the fulcrum point for this collective reflection. Such initiatives typically provide an entry point for greater participation of local people in the planning of development operations as well (cf. Easton 1997a). A new effort of this nature conducted with ADEA participation under CILSS[5] direction over the last two years furnishes some additional evidence of the high interest and great capacity of local actors for enhanced roles in educational policy and planning. Educators developed across five countries of West Africa the prototype for a large-scale exercise of future visioning, entitled "Sahel 21", in which selected local communities were asked to examine

- what had changed in their environment over the last thirty years from an ecological, demographic, economic, political and educational point of view;
- what factors underlie such trends and where they might be leading;
- what futures different groups in the community would prefer to the projected ones; and
- what might be done at local and national levels to move toward the desired scenarios.

The undertaking elicited a high level of enthusiasm among participants of all ages and categories at the local level and provided critical fresh input for the planning process within CILSS.

[5] Comité Inter-états de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel -- Interstate Committee for Drought Abatementin the Sahel.

The practical implications

One excellent way of developing the competence of national educational researchers and planners while helping them enhance the relevance of their work is to grant them (under performance contract) responsibility for organizing and training *local* partners in the execution of participatory research and planning endeavors -- activities that are shaped by local perceptions of problems and genuinely "owned" by stakeholders. There are few more effective ways of "widening the circle" or of giving voice to the ultimate artisans and beneficiaries of educational improvement. As a Zimbabwean proverb succinctly puts it, "Stories of the hunt will be stories of glory until the day when animals have their own historians!"

5. New complementarities between formal and nonformal education

The issues

Collaboration fundamentally means *broadening the company of those concerned with, and actively contributing to, educational improvement*. In this realm, as in so many others, charity surely begins at home: we must start by broadening our own image of education and its *dramatis personae*. It is high time that the educational system in fact become one -- a system, that is, whose parts in fact mesh; or, to choose a less mechanical metaphor, high time that it grow into the flexibly-knit organ of social renewal that it most certainly can be[6]. How can we nurture better partnering among the varied formal, nonformal and informal dimensions of the educational enterprise on the African continent?

The findings

Studies conducted with ADEA participation over the last two years have focused on a variety of emerging complementarities between formal and nonformal learning, as well as a variety of "hidden" dimensions of the educational system. They have covered topics like the following under-researched issues:

- the practical applications of Koranic learning in Islamic West Africa,
- the experimentation of mature-age entry and equivalency schemes for older higher education applicants throughout southern Africa,

[6] One is reminded of the story of Mahatma Gandhi's arrival in London in 1946 to sign the agreement leading to the independence of India from British rule. Asked by a reporter on his descent from the airplane what he now thought of Western Civilization, he responded simply, "I think it would be a good idea."

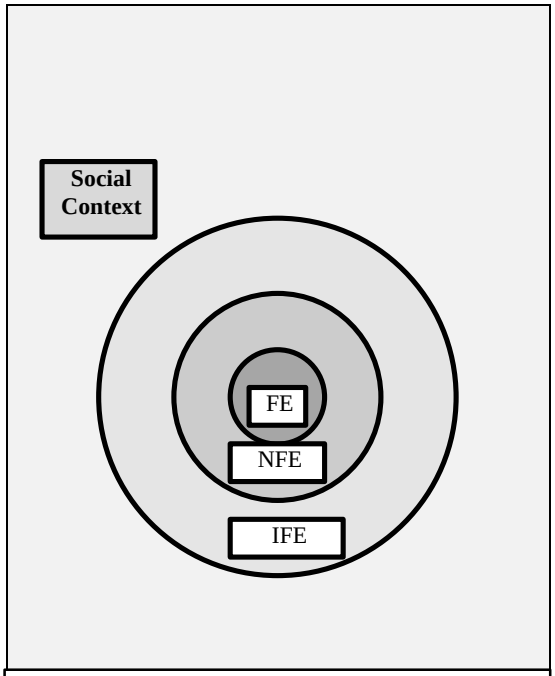

Figure 1:
Schematic representation of three varieties of education within their context

- the development of alternative African-language based forms of primary education in Burkina Faso,
- the acquisition of new skills by informal sector apprentices in Chad,
- training in transformative learning for local church leadership in Kenya,
- grafting formal vocational training centers on nonformal educational bases in Ghana,

...and a series of related topics chosen to broaden our vision of what education is, of the variety of modalities through which it is created, and of the mutually-supportive roles that the formal and nonformal sectors can play in catalyzing this larger social reality.

The results of these studies paint a picture of education in "rich and vibrant colors," to quote the title of Budd Hall's 25th anniversary article on the evolution of nonformal education in the international review *Convergence* (Hall 1993) -- a picture of a pluralist but potentially collaborative and highly dynamic system, which might be rather drably presented as a series of concentric circles like those in Figure 1. Here formal education lies in the center, but is surrounded on all sides by the many varieties of nonformal training. Both are in turn embedded in the myriad daily habits and resources of informal learning, and the entire system is squarely set within the larger social context. Few formal school graduates or drop-outs actually assume productive roles in society without passing through some form of nonformal apprenticeship and informal learning; and lessons learned from life and in nonformal venues are often best acquired on a foundation of formal education or brought to fruition by subsequent cycles of schooling.

The practical implications

One of our greatest and most exciting challenges in increasing collaboration for educational renewal over the upcoming decade is certainly to perfect collaboration and complementarity *within* the broader educational system itself. Education is a broad social process that, unless purposefully

obstructed, proceeds with or without the support of specific external forms and institutions -- though it advances furthest and meets social needs most fully if collective resources are mustered and a variety of interlocking institutional venues created to facilitate it. The variety of the system is its strength, and collaboration among its diverse parts the lifeblood that allows it to grow. Nonformal education provides a laboratory for new modes of instruction, a bridge between formal education and the social context, a needs-based and flexible modality for spreading learning throughout the community and for encouraging the continual use and development of the kind of abilities schools seek to foster. Formal education supplies the structure to generalize delivery, a standards-based modality for ensuring quality, a hierarchy for scaling new heights in technical prowess. Informal learning undergirds both.

It follows that developing equivalencies, passages and reciprocities among these three arenas, and the multitude of specific forms inhabiting them, must be high on the agenda of educators in the new century. Let there be greatly increased collaboration for educational improvement Africa-wide, and let It be modeled at home -- within the interstices of the system itself!

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